

Musical practices of Indian classical music

Kernal Singh Sandhu informs us that *Indians have been present in Singapore from the very first day of the foundation as a British trading post by Raffles in January 1819.*¹ By 1821, there were 132 Indians excluding the others in the garrison and camp-followers which would have totalled 4727 in Singapore. Between 1819 and 1980, we see the Indian population to comprise anywhere between 2.8% and 11.8% of the entire population.² The first batch of Indian convicts reportedly arrived from Sumatra in April 1825. Apart from the facts that 10% were released every year and some settled down locally, Sandhu Singh's point is *the history of the convicts was the history of the Public Works Department.* We are also informed that the mutterings against the "concentrated scourings of the Indian jails" eventually led to the closing down of Singapore as a penal station in May 1873.³ Although all the major ethno-linguistic groups from India were present, the Tamil community comprised 75% of the Indian population in Singapore. Of the Northern Indians, the Punjabis made up about 51% of the North Indian population in Singapore in 1980.⁴

Chulia and Market Street in the 1830s was the most occupied space by the earliest Indians (South Indian Chettiar and Tamil Muslim) and it seemed to fit in their professions as traders, financiers, money-changers, petty shopkeepers, boatmen and others. Another group, comprising Sindhi, Gujarati and Punjabi dealing mainly in the cloth and textile business while the third group of Gujarati and Muslim textile and jewellery traders could be found in Arab street region. A fourth grouping of Indians consisted of Tamil shopkeepers around the Farrer Road and Serangoon Road area, which was to become the centre of the city during the 19th century. The last prominent concentration of Indians exists around the dock and railway, where many of the workers have been Tamil, Telugu and Malayalis. Sandhu points out that the concentration of Indian communities in Singapore reflect *the efforts of the British administrators to plan urban development and fit the indigenous and foreign populations into convenient moulds* besides other factors such as *the siting of government labour lines close to the labourers' place of work and the traditional Indian tendency to congregate in homogeneous communities.*⁵

1833 was a watershed year when slavery was abolished throughout the British empire. There was a need for cheap and subservient labour to develop Singapore and other British possessions. The Straits Settlements were for a while turned into

convict stations, and the convicts were used in the construction of roads in Singapore and maintaining the cleanliness of the streets. They were also credited for the physical effort in erecting St. Andrew's Cathedral and the Government House. Sri Mariamman Temple was built by Indian Convicts in 1828. Indian labourers have also been credited with monuments like the Johore Causeway, The Sembawang Dockyards, and the former Kallang Airport.⁶ A. Mani also informs us that both missionary and government schools were staffed almost wholly by Indians and the police constabulary was practically dominated by Sikhs and Indians.⁷

The boom of 1900-1920 which caused a sudden increase in the demand for rubber and tin in Malaya and for import and export in Singapore generated the need to replace gambier, sugar-cane and pepper with rubber. Geographically, this meant the extension to areas around the Bukit Timah and Seletar in the north and Pasir Panjang and Jurong in the west. Mani points out the logical growth of settlements along main transport routes. Dhobie lines along Orchard Road have resulted in its memory via its name, Dhoby Ghaut. Post 1920s, the British, in anticipation of further Japanese military expansions, developed the northern part of the island as a naval base, building a military base in Sembawang and an airbase in Changi. By 1962, the number of Indians living in Chong Pang, Jalan Kayu, Nee Soon and Yew Tee villages near the military establishments far outnumbered the Malay population there.⁸ Given the changes post 1968, Ang Mo Kio, Toa Payoh, Queenstown, Macpherson and Woodlands new towns became new focal points in the 1960s and 1970s. Further out-migration also resulted in Indians making home in Yishun, Hougang, Tampines and Jurong.⁹

Tradition seems to be adhered to despite the urban nature of Singapore. Outside of the experimental and art traditions, music-making is very prominent at social, ritual and religious festivals within the Indian communities. The **nadaswaram** and **tavil** are two such musical instruments performed at the appropriate point of a marriage ceremony when a bridegroom ties the tali (the equivalent of a wedding ring) onto the neck of his bride while the priests chant mantras or verses from the holy book. The Spring festivals of Holi (North Indian) and Pongal (South Indian) are occasions for music. During Holi, a bonfire is lit and participants splash each other with coloured water and **phag** (songs) are sung about great feats accomplished by heroes in the Ramayana and Mahabhrata. During Pongal, newly-cooked rice is brought to the temple where pujas (prayers) are chanted. The Sindhi community celebrates Cheti Chand (the birthday of Jhoole Lal—an incarnation of the god Vishnu) with panjra (devotional songs) as the food is cooked for the celebration.

The South Indian classical tradition known as the Carnatic tradition emerges as influence for musical practice in Singapore. Classical traditions and music by implication appear in the early films of the 20th century in the form of folk and Hindu mythology. The classical tradition seems to have been prevalent, by implication, in temple grounds and in rituals throughout the year. This then suggests the practice of the South Indian classical tradition in Singapore as early as the 19th century.¹⁰ The classical tradition seems to have been prevalent, by implication, in early 19th century Singapore. By 1821, there were 132 Indians; excluding those in the garrison and camp-followers which would have totalled 4727 in Singapore. The Sri Mariamman Temple was reportedly built by Indian convicts in 1828.¹¹ Into the 20th century, around the years 1925 and 1926, oral interviewees relate the presence of Indian dances, dramas and folk performing arts which were popular in Selegie and were performed free for the public. The actors and directors came all the way from India. The length of their performances was dependent upon their popularity reflected by the size of the crowd, thus the bigger the crowd, the longer they performed.¹² Dances such as ‘Silambu’, ‘Karan’, and ‘Kalai Nigalchi’, a combination of themed dramatic art and gestures, were the favourites. Silambu is the name of the age old Indian (Tamil) art of self-defence whereby a staff (long, wooden pole) is used to defend or attack your opponents.¹³ Stories such as the Ramayana and the Tamil epics were also acted. The Ramayana tells the history of Sri Ramachandra, the son of King Dasaratha and his wife Sita and his brothers. This work tells much about the Hindus of that time, their customs, their way of life, their arts and their technology. The Ramayana (or Life of Rama) is generally regarded as the first poetical work of purely human origin and legend has it that its author, Valmiki, was originally an ignorant highway robber whose life and character were transformed through meditation after he was instructed by the great sage Narada. From this incident, he received his name ‘Valmiki’ which means ‘born of an ant hill’.¹⁴ When the Chariot was carried from the temple during Thaipusam, the Silambu dance would follow sometimes with the horse and tiger dance, which is a popular folk art among Tamil Indians. Visitors from as far as Johor Bahru and Kuantan would travel to Selegie just to watch these performances. However, at one point, the government banned these performances on the streets as they were too rowdy.¹⁵

We are informed that drama troupes came by a ship known as the **Rajullah** in the 1930s and docked at **Naval Base**. Historical and epic dramas were staged at Alexandra Hall while Kathakali drama was staged at Sembawang. Posters on horse coaches, big notices, newspaper advertisements on drama titles were also ways of

organising publicity for dramas while Tanjong Pagar, Potong Pasir and Serangoon Road were the main sites for such publicity.¹⁶ Accounts indicated strength of audience support for shows and there is arguably the first reference to *band music* for dramatic purposes. Practitioners recall being part of a musical ensemble referred to as **Music and Dramatic Society**.¹⁷ What they identified as Band music was played by members of a music party;¹⁸ a musical ensemble within a dramatic troupe which was to become an independent group. Gregory Booth's study of the Madras Corporation Band identifies the wind band ensemble in a 1911 recording as the Tanjore Band which had become by the early 20th century something of a status symbol. Wind bands had become a new processional requirement as the public of central Tamil Nadu gradually learned to combine music ensembles and their concomitant layers of cultural meaning. This extended to public and private, religious and secular processions.¹⁹

Names of musical band parties²⁰ in the 1950s and 1960s were identified together with notable musicians, MP Gurusamy and Pundit Ramalingam who were identified in oral accounts as those synonymous with the South Indian classical tradition as well as a semi-classical tradition. One explanation offered for the term *semi-classical* referred to the degree of conformity to the raga or mode of the song/music. In the South Indian classical context, some modes had very specific contexts, times and occasions. Music or songs which deviated from this convention could be found in semi-classical or light classical settings. Songs of South Indian film were such examples and this was a known practice in south Indian film.²¹

Christina Edmund recalls how her father, Edmund Appau, a Hindu Tamil by birth and later convert to Catholicism upon marriage, remembered visiting temples with his father to watch Indian classical music in his growing years. The New World Park was also the site where various Indian dramatic productions were performed. The Singapore Indian Artistes Association, for instance, had Tamil plays put up from the late 1940s till the 1960s.²² In 1948, together with the late Mr V Sinniah, a tabla player, Edmund Appau founded arguably the first Indian musical group in Singapore known as the **New Indian Amateur Orchestra**,²³ known essentially as an Indian classical ensemble, more specifically of the Carnatic tradition.

Reference to *band music*²⁴ is found in its supporting role in drama, particularly Indian classical derivation. S.Sivam recalls how in the post WWII period... *even ladies washing clothes or washing rice would stop to listen to **Thiagaraja Bhagavathar** singing... and songs by **T.R. Mahalingam**, who were from the Carnatic tradition and semi-classical as well.*²⁵ Repertoire reportedly consisted of *cinema songs...early MGR films, films about gods and goddesses with songs by*

*Thiagaraja, A Kittapa and K. Ramasamy...²⁶ Mythological movies were great favourites running to packed houses with films such as **Thiruvilaiyaadal**, **Saraswathi Sabadam**, **Kanthan Karunai**, and **Aathi Parashakthi** to name a few. It had classical Indian music and it educated many of us on our religious background. At that time they used play the gramophone with the label **His Master's Voice**...people from the elite class learned classical music and **Bharatha Natyam** from **Bhaskar's Dance Academy** and **Singapore Indian Fine Arts**; especially the Ceylonese Tamils and the Brahmin Tamils.²⁷ The Tamils who were from the middle class went to small time teachers who taught dance for film music.²⁸ Hindu Temples played a big part in promoting music and dance then and even now. There were performances of Carnatic vocal and instrumental music on the first half of the evening and all dances on the second half. It is interesting to note the dancers performed popular dance numbers from the films, either as solo or duet or groups.²⁹*

Narratives in Indian mythology formed a common bond between music of South Indian classical (and semi-classical) tradition and even early films from India screened in Singapore. According to a local consumer and observer of Tamil cinema, Balakrishnan Veerapan:

Mythological movies were great favourites here...ran to packed houses. They had [Indian] classical music and it educated many of us on our religious background. We practically saw all the "Hindu Mythological figures" on screen.³⁰

The proliferation of Tamil language and culture seems to have had somewhat of a boost in the post Japanese Occupation period of the 1950s. In terms of a greater awareness of both forces of attraction and repulsion in the Indian community in Singapore, at least two factions are noted. The first is the division of Tamil and Hindi in the separation of North and South Indian groups. Within the South Indian community, there were two groups, according to A. Mani, **Tamil-using Indians** and **Tamil-losing Indians**.³¹ The Tamil-using community was led by G. Sarangapani who went on to create a Malayan Tamil identity, with the *Thamizhar Thirunal* (Tamils Festival), which had ramifications even further afield in Thailand and Indonesia. This movement largely affected the Tamil-using middle and working class Indians. *The Tamil language was used as a unifying factor even when the individuals were separated by caste and religion.*³² When the **Goh Report**, published in 1978, emphasised the need to pass in a second language, the Ministry of Education's response for the Indian community was to increase the number of schools offering Tamil as a second language.³³

Mr. Sarangapani's efforts had immediate ramifications culturally and musically. In the year 1953, the very first Tamil Festival was performed at the Happy World Stadium at Jalan Besar, catering to the many Indians around that area. The Tamil Festival is actually the 'Pongal Festival' or the Harvest Festival in English. It was a celebration not only for the Tamilians, but also for all Indians who spoke the Tamil language.³⁴ Dr. Seetha Lakshmi notes that *after 1952* (with the establishment of the Tamils Representative Council), *Mr Sarangapani initiated the Thamizhar Thirunal which was celebrated as the Harvest Festival (pongal) in India. This was very popular and about 350 participants took part in a talentime organised by Mr Sarangapani.*³⁵

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This movement largely affected the Tamil-using middle and working class Indians. *The Tamil language was used as a unifying factor even when the individuals were separated by caste and religion.*³⁶ In the face of fragmentation of language, religion or caste prevalent in the Indian population in Singapore in the 1960s and beyond, the Tamil language teacher emerged as the new catalyst to community orientation. This can be traced to a movement called the Dravidian movement which in Malaya and Singapore was essentially a working class movement against Brahminic domination of Indian society beyond India.³⁷ It is said that the Goh report published in 1978, which emphasised the need to pass in a second language created considerable concern among parents, the Ministry of Education's response for the Indian community was to increase the number of schools offering Tamil as a second language.³⁸

The ancient penitential rites, thaipusam and pookkulittal (vow to walk on fire) are sustained by certain types of music. Thaipusam has been observed in Singapore for well-over 180 years. Hindu devotees do penance by carrying kavadis (metal structures with spikes embedded in the devotee's flesh) over an extended distance. During this journey of penance, the accompanying party does an improvised call-and-response melody that is primarily rhythmic, facilitating a trance-like dance. The Singapore Chronicle in the 19th century bears witness to some of these

activities with particular concern expressed of the practice of what approximates in time as the fire-walking ceremony³⁹ while an incident during Thaipusam in 1896 becomes the subject of concern with police intervention and enforcement at a religious festival.⁴⁰

Fire-walking, like thaipusam, is penance and stems from vows made to the rain goddess—Mariamman. Music-making here is contained within the temple and its role is to create a state of mind for the ritual. Maha Shivrathri—in celebration of the birth of the Lord Shiva, japa (constant chanting) is initiated two days before for meditation. On the evening of the day, a long puja (prayer) is made four times through the night symbolising the four ages of human civilisation. At intervals between, bhajan (holy songs) are sung with musical accompaniment to keep the devotees awake. Sometimes jugalbandhi (mixed North and South music) performances or villupattu, storytelling with music and sketches take place.

Indian classical music is practised in Singapore largely because of the efforts of private schools, organisations like temples and dedicated individuals. Interviews with promoters and practitioners in Singapore engender the perception of a strong dependence on musical, educational and professional resources in India, with the exception, perhaps, of groups involved in experimental projects. Communication with cultural resources in the various cities and centres in India translate into a constant stream of Indian artists and teachers to Singapore to enhance learning and appreciation of Indian classical music. Much of the classical and folk traditions have been dealt with in Joseph E.E. Peters' Singapore Chapter on **Evolving Music traditions of ASEAN** as well as a number of Internet Websites in relation to the Societies mentioned above.⁴¹ There are some well-known sources for the teaching and learning of Indian classical music in Singapore:

1. Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society
2. Academy of Fine Arts
3. Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society
4. Kala mandir (temple of Fine Art)
5. Apsaras Arts
6. The Kolam-Ayer Indian Youth Ensemble

Although there is a distinction between North and South Art Traditions, collectively they form the bulk of the vocal, instrumental performance programmes

for those interested in the practice of North and South Indian musical traditions. According to Joseph Peters, the Raga-Tala formula (modal/rhythmic configuration) provides some basis of unity among musicians although there are differences in execution and approaches. South (Carnatic) and North (Hindustani) are the main divisions found in Singapore although the Carnatic tradition predominates given that demographically there seem to be more of Tamil origin than other Indian communities. With the North and South Indian traditions firmly placed, the sitar and tabla have become popular among Singaporean Indians. Attempts to mix Northern and Southern styles have become regular features in **jugalbandhi** performances at social gatherings. Recently, there have also been trends towards creating more original forms or aspects of Indian music attributed to Singapore.

Dance-Drama

The increase in dance-drama productions, some elaborately and the development of an Indian Orchestra are part of that trend. In its traditional context, Indian Classical music would have been performed as part of religious, social or cultural events. There is little to deny in South Indian classical musics a symbiotic relationship between dance and music evident in the highly structured forms like **bharatanatyam, katakali, odissi, katak**, to name a few. Learning and performing these forms are the staple means of a livelihood for private Indian music schools here. There are also attempts to fuse the skills and efforts of dancers, choreographers, musicians, composers, set designers, mural painters, lighting designers and scriptwriters since the early 1990s. Instrumentation for musical accompaniment tends to be orchestral and in a way influenced by theatre musicals. However, strict Indian classical musical rules are usually observed in the creation of dance-drama music. It is not unusual to find pre-recorded music played as accompaniment to dance-dramas. This is to do with the problem of rehearsing episodes with choreography of a detailed nature. Indian musicians rely heavily on improvisation when performing musical works. Dance-drama, therefore, with live accompaniment places different demands on dancers and choreographers and is an option not considered viable. Major dance-dramas have surged in Singapore. In 1993, the oldest Indian epic, Ramayana, was staged by Kala Mandir with an elaborate setting lasting about four hours and using a montage of musical and dance ideas from Bali, Thailand and Sarawak. Kala Mandir have had a track record in this respect, producing dance expressions of works like Swan Lake (1988), The legend of Mahsuri (1989) The legend of Lady White Snake (1990) and Jonathan Livingstone Seagull (1991). In 1994, Kala Mandir stages Midsummer Night's Dream and Dharmasoka, the story of King Ashoka's religious conversion. Others

have also trodden the same path. The Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society (Siddharta—the life of Buddha, Thyaga Chinam—based on the love tale by Kannadasan, Aum Muruga III—based on the life of Lord Muruga and on whose behalf Thaipusam is celebrated) and Apsara Arts Society (Ganesha—the story of the Hindu elephant-god) have been working along the same ideas. Dance drama has now reached a point where music is written by local Indian musicians.

Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir

The idea to establish an ensemble of Indian instruments materialised in 1985 when the Singapore Indian Orchestra was established under the Peoples Association—an umbrella organisation that coordinates socio-cultural activities at the national community level. A choir was added in 1990 and together the Indian orchestra and choir have given more than 100 performances and a number of people writing music for them.

Instrumental Configuration consists of Veena, Sitar, Western violin (but played Indian style), Flute, Clarinet, Percussion consisting of Mrdangam, Tabla, Ghatam, Ganjira, and other small percussion instruments. Occasionally, other musical instruments from the Western, Chinese, or Malay traditions are added.

The Indian orchestra plays two types of music; Indian classical and what is called ‘experimental’ music. In playing Indian classical music, the performance adheres to raga-tala formats but sonorities are distinguishable because of the instrumentation. When experiments are made, the trend is towards syncretism, multi-layered melodic lines, ideas from popular music and mixing instruments from Chinese and Malay traditions. At the recently concluded Singapore Arts Festival 2002, the Indian Orchestra and choir combined with the Peoples association Youth Chinese Orchestra, The Orkestra Melayu Singapura, Singapore Wind Symphony, The Vocal Consort and Singapore National Youth Orchestra to perform Mozart’s Symphony no.40 in G minor, Vivaldi’s Double Violin Concerto and some jazz numbers.

Discussion

Historically, the Indian community has had its fair share of problems associated with its religious beliefs even up to as recent as twenty-five years ago. The following are a sample of the difficulties encountered although at different times, it had somehow not been possible for the community itself to articulate, defend, or clarify the significance of their practices. The question of musical practice may

have been far more difficult to define, vis-à-vis John Blacking's use of the term 'music' but in 19th century Singapore musical practice was described as hideous noise while up to 1980, when definitions of musical instruments reached a new threshold, police enforcement has authorized a new definition of musical instruments and therefore musical practice in religious rituals.

A letter to the Editor of the Singapore Chronicle dated October 25th 1833 has this to offer...*Mr. Editor yesterday the Kling inhabitants of Singapore applied to the Magistrates for permission to go in procession through the Streets of the Town at night with lighted torches and fireworks, as they have been in the habit of doing in formers years...This practice was presented by the Grand Jury...as highly dangerous and recommended to be put a stop to it; nevertheless the Magistrates...thought proper to sanction its continuance by a direct permission. The procession took place accordingly, and although no accidents from fire occurred on this occasion not on any former one, yet it is absurd to argue that because no accidents have happened, therefore none ever can and will happen. Any one who had witnessed the procession of last night would have been led to form an opposite opinion...if this ridiculous indulgence continues to be granted we shall hear some day, of half the Town being burnt, when doubtless our supient Magistracy will exclaim: Who would have thought it?....*⁴²

The presence of Hindu temples would have generated the need for music for worship and devotion. Our only key to the past is indirect evidence surrounding practice which we believe to be and assume as integral parts of ritual aspects of Hindu worship. If this is a procession in late portion of the year, the only one that corresponds to the traditions might be the Fire-Walking Procession. It is strange that there is no mention made of music although there are some very clear definitions of what is described as music or not as the case may be. It is also entirely possible that whatever went on in the procession must not have counted for anything worth attending to except the potential fire hazard.

A clue to the extent to which the Government of the Straits Settlement was concerned is evident in the legislation given below with specific reference to Music:

1. *Fees Payable to Police for Permits for Music & c, in Streets Government Notice 13 February 1868, Government Gazette p.339*
2. *Police may give licenses for the use of Music in public roads, streets & c, on the occasion of native festivals and ceremonies (Section 32) 1872*

3. *Music in Street, &c., without license—penalty (Section 19 no.2)—Beating drums, tom-toms &c., without permission—penalty—(Section 21 no.8) 1872*
4. *Police Rules for music at Native Festivals and ceremonies Orders in Council 4 August 1875 Govt. gazette, p.496.*
5. *No Licenses granted for playing Musical Instruments in Streets and public thoroughfares within a radius of 3 miles from Central Police Station...Government Notice 26 May 1881 Government Gazette p.465.*

The foregoing Amended—Licenses only granted under special instructions from Governor Government Notice 26 May 1881, Government gazette p.465 See also Assemblies and Processions—Fireworks—Mahomedans. Acts and Ordinances in force in the colony of the Straits Settlements 2nd edition, to the end of 1892.

MUSIC

Licenses may be given for in public roads, streets & c. See POLICE 7 (b) Penalty for breach of license. See SUMMARY PROCEEDINGS

1(a) Penalty for beating drums, tom-toms, &c, in streets; not to apply to military music.

XII of 1872 SUMMARY CRIMINAL JURISDICTION

Whoever, without the permission in writing of the Chief Police Officer beats a drum or tom-tom or blows a horn or trumpet or beats or sounds any brass or other metal instrument or utensil.

EXEMPTION: This Clause shall not be held to apply to Military Music

Another more direct impact of a parallel fear is evident at a later time as reported in the Singapore Free Press:

31 January 1896

The Tai-pusam or harvest thanksgiving festival was celebrated at the Chitty Temple Tank Road last evening with all the usual noise and ceremony. The silver car, drawn by the sacred bullock made the customary procession and in the evening the Temple brightly lighted and garishly decorated was thronged by a dense crowd of natives and others large numbers of Europeans responding to the general invitation issued by the temple authorities. The proceedings were less musical than on the previous day because the instruments of the Maharajah of Travancore's band have been taken charge of by the Police, as they exceeded in number those mentioned in the permit. Mr. Groom applied this morning for a mandamus directing the delivery of the confiscated instruments.⁴³

A little more detail is offered on 3 February 1896

CONFISCATED DRUMS

*The band of the Maharajah of Travancore was engaged to play at the Hindoo Taipusam Festival. They took part in the procession on January 29th but were arrested by the Police and locked up in a cell for two hours till bail was forthcoming. A kettle-drum, a big drum, a cornet, a bagpipe and a euphonium were confiscated by the police and the band lost its engagements for the following nights. On Friday, Mr. Groom applied for a mandamus directing the magistrate to give up the instruments on security being given. Mr. Justice Leach said the mandamus should have been asked for against the police, but would not give leave to amend the motion but said no doubt the Attorney General who was present, would advise the Police. The case comes on in the Police Court on Tuesday but the proceedings seem to have been unnecessarily harsh, as the chetties had a license for the music in the procession and the complaint only seems to be that of using too many instruments.*⁴⁴

THE NOISE NUISANCE 18 February 1896 Correspondence TO THE EDITOR

SIR—I have been much annoyed during the last six months by “Night Noises” in a Hindoo temple near my house. There are all night services held on an average three nights every week, and these occasions shouting, yelling, beating of gongs and tom-toms and the dismal sound of the conch shell go to make up hideous night hours of torture to luckless Europeans who have to live in the neighbourhood. I have not a word to say against day services and would endure the noise say up to eleven o’clock at night; but these services do not begin until ten o’clock and are kept up till two, three, four, and sometimes even five o’clock in the morning. Then there is the constant noise of Klings arriving and departing from the temple and they shout and squabble on the public road in front of our courtyard. Now, Sir, it is monstrous that British residents in a British Colony should be compelled to endure such noises, merely because Kling coolies see fit to keep up their noisy rites during the livelong night. The nocturnal noises of all sorts have increased enormously in our neighbourhood during the last twelve months and if they are not put a stop to, Singapore will attain an unenviable notoriety as a place of torture for European householders. Thanking you for your public spirited action in ventilating the noise question, in your valuable paper, I am, Sir

A MUCH TIRED SUFFERER

What seems now to be needed is a statement by the Chief Police Officer as to the precise procedure to be adopted by the public for the abatement of noise nuisance. We shall be glad to publish it. [Ed.S.F.P]⁴⁵

In the present post-independence context, Thaipusam seems to have lived up to its controversial reputation in Singapore. Vineeta Sinha offers her views on some of the difficulties surrounding the event:

*In recent years...Thaipusam has become embroiled in several controversies...the debate over the need for **musical accompaniment** during a Thaipusam procession and the abuse that supposedly comes with allowing music on the roads, started in the mid 1970s. There were complaints, both formal and informal, from members of the public to the effect that Thaipusam, labelled a religious occasion, was losing its character as such because a large number of youth at the festival were behaving like 'rowdies' and giving the festival a carnival mood instead of treating the day with the dignity and solemnity it deserved. The presence of youths dressed in garish and outlandish outfits carrying and playing musical instruments of all shapes and sizes and often the use of substitutes (such as metal pails, dustbins, plastic drums, and pails, cylinders and cooking pots and using plastic combs and chopsticks as drumsticks) to 'make music' were cited as contributing to this undignified carnival-like atmosphere on the day. The actual ban and seizure of musical instruments was effected in 1979, when the Hindu Endowment Board (HEB formed in 1969, in conjunction with the Ministry of Social Affairs) issued a list of conditions to be followed by participants of Thaipusam. Amongst others, there was a general prohibition on dancing by those accompanying the **kavadi** and a ban on musical instruments alien to the festival such as Western drums and bongos. Traditional Indian music is today allowed only within the temple grounds and under the supervision of policemen on duty. As far as the authorities are concerned there seems to be some ambiguity about why this ban has been implemented. Reasons include noise pollution, disturbance to traffic and the public on the roads, the possibility of abuse of musical instruments by youth whose behaviour may turn the festival into a 'comic opera'. According to HEB, the decision to ban music on the roads was taken by the Police authorities; according to a Straits Times article dated 21 January 1981, a police spokesman was reported to have said that the ban on musical instruments during religious foot procession was a 'government policy matter' but declined to elaborate...a majority of participants and observers objected to the ban and expressed their disapproval at the police action. Many viewed this as 'racial discrimination' pointing out that music is allowed in the festivals and rituals of other communities. Others see this as 'government control' in matters of religion. In 1981, the HEB appealed to the police to reconsider the ruling against all musical instruments on grounds that it is*

*‘traditional to have classical music accompany the **kavadi** bearers on their annual penance.’ Their appeal was rejected. The issue remains largely unresolved but every year during the festival, the same topic is raised by the authorities, the Hindu Advisory Board (HAB was formed in 1915) HEB and the Police and generates considerable discussion. The only difference is that both the HAB and HEB argue in favour of banning the musical instruments that the sanctity of the festival be the main consideration.⁴⁶ (emphases mine)*

Music for worship and/or devotion is either acknowledged implicitly as in the Kling procession concern of 1833, or as in the Taipusam festival of 1892, 1896 and even 1980, which was regarded as a threat to civic order and management in the history of Hindu religious practices in Singapore.

Not all of instances of music in these settings are negative. While both musical configurations of South Indian classical modes of performance as well as western popular culture seem diametrically opposed, there is a site where both seem to co-exist; the Hindu temple and the time in question is the nine-day preparation to the fire-walking ceremony. Mohammed Ali Nilavu makes the observation that:

On each day of Navarattiri, the temples sponsor a cultural performance. This includes classical dance, music and devotional songs (the latter sometimes accompanied by a Western-style band).⁴⁷

Oral accounts corroborate this observation and added the temple priests had not objected to the presentation of devotional material with a western-style accompaniment. While Indian classical tradition and practice continues to be promoted as essential for its role in supporting and enhancing cohesive worship and devotion in sacred sites and occasions, music and dances are now available to interested participants from the non-Indian communities in Singapore. It is not clear whether there is a matching correspondence with music for worship and Indian classical music and that is an area which has potential for development and further research.

Additionally, the sociological element of devotional songs played by a Western-style band is a significant element in consideration of Lefebvre’s triad of spatial practice, representations of space and representational space.⁴⁸ That there are groups normally associate with popular culture or film culture performing alongside Indian classical modes of performances creates contradictory space of the sacred and devotional material with both validated and secular musical

instruments – one which the temple priests themselves seem encourage by booking such groups.

However, in consideration of the music for worship and devotion, Indian classical tradition and practice continues to be promoted as essential for its role in supporting and enhancing cohesive worship and devotion in sacred sites and occasions while adding on the dimension that its music and dances are now available to interested participants from the non-Indian communities in Singapore. Much more about the intersection of classical traditions and practices with contemporary lifestyles are as much about conformity as about contradiction since Western band configurations are associated with the Indian community as a medium for expression of film music in Singapore. Moreover, the presence of an ensemble like the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir in experimental settings presents both convergences and collisions with tradition and modernity by attempting Indian classical practice with very different instrumentation while attempting to increase the repertoire of the ensemble with repertoire outside of its practice and instrumental ability. It is hoped that future and further scholarship can identify and provide further clues about these practices.

REFERENCES

1 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore, in Indian Communities in Southeast Asia, edited by K.S.Sandhu and A.Mani (eds), ISEAS, Times Academic Press1993, p,774.

2 Ibid., p.775, Table 30.1.

3 Ibid., p.775.

4 Ibid., p.777.

5 Ibid., p.778.

6 Krishnan, 1936, p.25, quoted in A. Mani Indians in Singapore Society, pp.788-809, in Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore, in Indian Communities in Southeast Asia, ed.ted by K.S.Sandhu and A.Mani (eds), ISEAS, Times Academic Press1993, p. 790.

7 Mahajani, 1960, p.112, in A. Mani, Indians in Singapore Society, op.cit., p.790-791

8 Fung 1975, p.,17, cited in A. Mani. op.cit., p.793-794, particularly the statistics Table 31.2.

9 Ibid., p.794.

10 Singapore Chronicle, October 31, 1833, Vol.3, no.44, Letter to the Editor. The letter expresses particular concerns of fire and safety with an event which approximates the ritual of the fire-walking ceremony. Later, the Singapore Free Press, 31 January 1896, reports the confiscating of musical instruments used in the Thaipusam ritual at a temple at Tank Road by the police.

11 Kernial Singh Sandhu, op.cit, pp.774-775.

12 Taken from Oral Interview A00896/7 Subbiah Bullikutte Naidu; OI A001300 Chandrakasan Dharmalingam. I am indebted to Clement Liew for his invaluable assistance in providing me with this brief summary based on his research.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid and additional information in Omkara, The Hindu Centre, February 1983.

15 Oral Interview A00896/7 Subbiah Bullikutte Naidu; Oral Interview A001300 Chandrakasan Dharmalingam.

16 From the Synopsis of an Oral Interview with Purushothaman Thambyah, Oral History Board. Accession No. 1342. The oral interview is in Tamil.

17 Interview with SIMP, March 2004. George a guitarist recalls, *I joined in 1962, Usha Music Party...which was actually known as Usha Music and Dramatic Society*. SIMP members recall how their predecessors were considered part of music and dramatic society configuration.

18 Booth, Gregory D. The Madras Corporation Band: A Story of social change and indigenization, Asian Music Vol. XXVIII, no.1, Fall/Winter 1996/7, pp.61-86, p.67-68.

19 Ibid., p.67-68.

20 Ibid. According to oral interviewees, musical band parties were synonymous with music parties.

21 Personal correspondence with Radha Vijayan from the Peoples Association Lifeskills Branch, January 2005.

22 Microfilm The Singapore Indian Artistes Association—NA2345.

23 Most of the interviewees were of similar opinion that SIMP was a pioneer group but none knew of the New Indian Amateur Orchestra. The repertoire of New Indian Orchestra and the first SIMP was predominantly Carnatic, according to contemporaneous sources.

24 From the Synopsis of an Oral Interview with Purushothaman Thambyah, Oral History Board. Accession No. 1342. The oral interview is in Tamil. The term band here will require much further clarification but in the context of this synopsis, band is used to identify musical groups. The synopsis also includes names of musical band parties in 1950s and 1960s and includes names of famous musicians, MP Gurusamy, Pundit Ramalingam.

25 Interview with S.Sivam, 10 March 2004. Semi-classical is not clarified.

26 Interview with Singapore Indians Music Party, March 2004.

27 A.Mani's chapter, Indians in Singapore Society, pp.788-809, p.796, in Indian Communities in Southeast Asia, edited by K.S.Sandhu and A.Mani (eds), ISEAS, Times Academic Press, 1993. Mani notes a gulf in the South Indian community caused partly out of caste and community differences as well as notions of economic class. Additionally, the Sri Lankan (Ceylon) Tamils and Malayalees saw themselves well-oriented towards the use of the English language and colonial culture. In both senses, the subscription to Indian classical traditions as well as fine arts of the western tradition would have sufficed for elitism.

28 Ibid., p.796, points out that with the establishment of the Tamils Representative Council of 1952, the Tamil language was promoted in literature, mass media, particularly newspapers, and cultural issues. The Tamil language had for its support base Tamil-using and working class Indians.

29 E-interview with Balakrishnan Veerapan, Monday, October 6, 2003, 4:13 PM.

30 Ibid.

31 A.Mani op.cit., p.796. Mani cites examples of Tamils, particularly Sri Lankan Tamils who belonged to the administrative and clerical sectors of the colonial economy who were content to patronize Anglicized forms of colonial culture, English-medium schools for their children, their women learning fine arts...like Englishmen with Indian colorations.

32 Ibid., p. 796. The Malayalees went their own way and formed organisations for themselves. The pullout of the British forces from Singapore also resulted in an outflow of Malayalees. In the face of fragmentation of language, religion or caste prevalent in the Indian population in Singapore in the 1960s and beyond, the Tamil language teacher emerged as the new catalyst to community orientation. This can be traced to a movement called the Dravidian movement which in Malaya and Singapore was essentially a working class movement against Brahminic domination of Indian society beyond India.

33 Ibid., p.807. This is not longer the situation where Hindi has become, increasingly so in the last decade, the Indian language many parents subscribe to at the expense of Tamil and it has become a concern for the Tamil Teachers Association of Singapore.

34 Oral Interview with S. Varathan A001000/8. These festivities still occur today in the form of a Deepavali Festival Village that lasts 21 days and is similar to a street carnival. This provides a showcase for the best of Indian culture featuring pushcarts displaying and selling a variety of costumes, jewellery and accessories, food, paintings, handicrafts, spices and carpets. The carts will line Campbell Lane, from Serangoon Road to Clive Street and the roads will be closed to traffic throughout the 21 days. (STB) There will also be performances by local talents and foreign artistes presenting a rare mixture of South and North Indian cultures over a period of three weeks (except

Sundays) until the eve of Deepavali. To add to the colour, the Silver Chariot of Sri Mariamman Temple will make its visit to the Festival Village enroute its traditional journey for the Fire Walking Ceremony on 1 November. (STB)

35 E-correspondence with Dr. Seetha Lakshmi, Saturday, August 24, 2002, 10:50 am.

36 A.Mani, op. cit., p. 796. The Malayalees went their own way and formed organisations for themselves. The pullout of the British forces from Singapore also resulted in an outflow of Malayalees.

37 Ibid., p.795.

38 Ibid., p.807.

39 Letter to the Editor, Singapore Chronicle October 31, 1833, Vol.3, no.44. Unfortunately, this was referred to as a Kling festival. In most social exchange, this is a derogatory reference to members of the Indian community.

40 The Singapore Free Press 31 January 1896. Oddly, it is referred to as the Tai-pusam or harvest thanksgiving festival. Paradoxically, the festival of Thaipusam became a point of considerable debate in the late 1970s; see Vineeta Sinha, *Hinduism in Contemporary Singapore*, pp.826-846, pp. 832-833, quoted in Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore*, in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, edited by K.S.Sandhu and A.Mani (eds), ISEAS, Times Academic Press, 1993.

41 Peters, Joseph, Dondang Sayang in "Singapore" in Santos. Ramon P. ed. *The Musics of ASEAN*. Philippines: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1995, pp.93-131,

42 Letter to the Editor, Singapore Chronicle October 31, 1833, Vol.3, no.44.

43 Singapore Free Press, 31 January 1896.

44 Confiscated Drums, Singapore Free Press, 3 February 1896

45 **The Noise Nuisance**, Correspondence, Letter to the Editor, Singapore Free Press, 18 February 1896.

46 Vineeta Sinha, *Hinduism in Contemporary Singapore*, pp.826-846, pp. 832-833, quoted in Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore*, in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, edited by K.S.Sandhu and A.Mani (eds), ISEAS, Times Academic Press 1993, p. 790.

47 Parenthesis and emphasis in original. Navarattiri involves a nine-day preparation for the fire-walking ceremony.

48 Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell Publishers, 1991, p.38.